

Sicilian and Southern Italian languages: Lessons of Norway and Ireland

Tom Verso (January 23, 2011)



Indigenous languages suppressed by a foreign imposed lingua franca have shown profound capacity to reinvigorate themselves. If the 'dead national languages' of Norway and Ireland can be revived; almost certainly the marginalized languages of Sicily and southern Italy can displace the Piedmontese imposed Tuscan lingua franca. Indeed, the displacement may already be in process. But, there is no reason to believe southern-Italian Americans will ever again hear the sounds of their historic mother tongues and know the history and culture embedded in those languages. They will



continue to have their history and culture defined by mass-media and the American Tuscan-esque literati and teachers.

Introduction

Both Norway and Ireland experienced invasion, occupation and colonization on scale that few other countries in modern times have known. The magnitude of the occupation and depth of the social penetration obliterated whole aspects of their respective cultures; not the least of which was their national language and literature, rendered essentially 'dead'. Yet, in the twentieth century both countries have managed to resuscitate, as it were, those 'dead languages'.

The story of that resuscitation process has implication for students of the social history of Sicilian and other southern Italian languages, both in Italy and the US.

Dead Languages

"Archaism", classical scholar, linguist and world history Arnold J. Toynbee posits, "means an attempt to recapture some elements from the past of the society..."

(A Study of History v6 p 49 n3 emp.+)

Examples of such "past elements" are language and literature:

"When the spirit of Archaism is moved to express itself in the field of Language and Literature, the supreme tour de force to which it can address itself is bringing a 'dead language' to life again by putting it back into circulation as a living vernacular..." (Study v6 p63 emp.+)

Two examples of such an archaic "supreme tour de force" bringing a "dead language" back into "living vernacular" can be seen in twentieth Norway and Ireland.

Norway

Norway lost its political independence upon being forcefully taken into the Calmar Union with Sweden and Denmark in 1397. Essentially it never regained its complete independence until 1905. Toynbee reports:

"During the greater part of this period of more than 500 years Norway was politically united with Denmark under conditions which made her culturally as well as politically subordinate to Denmark.

"In these circumstances the indigenous Scandinavian literature in the Norse language gave place to a version of literature written in Danish by Norwegians.

"[Accordingly,] the Norse language died out in the fourteenth century; and by the sixteenth century Old Norse had ceased to be generally intelligible to the literate public in Norway...[Indeed,] Norwegian men-of-letters made translations of foreign language not into Norse but into Danish for the benefit of Norwegian readers.

(Study v6 p64)

In short, the indigenous national language of Norway ceased to exist and was replaced by the Danish lingua franca.

NOTE: the **role** that the "men[people]-of-letters" (writers of literature and translators) played in the subordination of the national language to the lingua franca; the **acquiescence of the indigenous literati and teachers** is a necessary condition for the successful substitution of a lingua franca for a national language.

Beginning in the early nineteenth century the **spirit of nationalism** began to take hold in Norway and a movement began to cultivate a "New Norse (Nynorsk)". Upon achieving complete independence in the twentieth century, the Nynorsk movement gained momentum and today has



achieve an official legal status and is used widely in Norway.

Ireland

Similarly, the Irish language Gaeige was the victim of foreign conquest and cultural domination by England. In the nineteenth century, the British government ordered that only English was to be taught in Irish schools. This combined with commercial domination, the great famine and the massive emigration of Irish nationals resulted in the virtual death of the Irish native tongue.

NOTE: Again, the role of **teachers** ("men [people]-of-letters" - literati) in the subordination of Irish national language.

However, as with the Norwegians, after regained their political independence in the twentieth century, there developed a movement to regain the historic language, which has also gained official and legal status. For example, in 2003 the Official Languages Act decreed that government publications be in both Irish and English.

Sicilian and Southern Italian languages

As with the Norwegians and the Irish, Sicily and the south of Italy were conquered and had a lingua franca imposed. The Piedmontese in 1860 militarily conquered the South, dominated commercially and educationally; and imposed Tuscan as the official lingua franca of government, commerce and "men-of-letters" (i.e. indigenous literati).

NOTE: Again, the role of "men [people]-of-letters". Playing the game of "**counterfactual history**", one might speculate what would have been the post-Risorgimento linguistic history of Sicily and the South if the literati had resisted the Tuscan imposition.

However, the Tuscan language, unlike the Norwegian and Irish lingua franca, has not succeeded in rendering the indigenous languages 'dead'. Indeed, there is significant evidence that after 150 years (8 generations) the indigenous languages are still robust even though the lingua franca pervades all mass media, government, commerce and educational institutions.

For example, in their introduction to a fascinating collection of essays *Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, David Forgacs and Robert Lumley observe:

"Italy has remained uniquely plurilingual, with...very large number of 'ItaloRomance' dialects which are still used by many speakers (often now in alternation with one or other of the many regional and social varieties of Italian)." (p.14 emp.+)

Tullio de Mauro, one of the essayists writes:

"The 'Italian dialects' -- which are very strongly differentiated and very viable, being used, even today, by more than 60 per cent of the population and, in fact, being used exclusively, that is, not alternating with Italian or another language, by 14 per cent of the population" (p. 95)

Why an indigenous language?

Nationalism

Clearly, there are complex social-psychological reasons why a people will revert to a 'dead language' like those of Norway and Ireland; or sustain a 'marked for dead' language such as those south of Rome. Nationalism is one such obvious social-psychological category, which was a significant factor in the case of Norway and Ireland

However, the persistence of the Italian languages south of Rome does not seem to be based on nationalism. These are diverse people with diverse languages who have no history of a sense of any social structure that approaches a modern nation state or national esprit. Accordingly, there must



be other social-psychological factors contributing to the need to preserve the indigenous language.

History and Culture - Hermeneutics

In a brilliant seminal pedagogic textbook on **methods of historians** used at the University of Paris circa 1900, the authors posit that **historians must be proficient:**

“... in the art of recognizing and determining hidden meanings in texts, which has always occupied a large space in the theory of **hermeneutic** and the exegesis of classical authors.” (Introduction to the Study of History, Langlois & Seignobos 1897; 1926 translation, p152 emp.+)

Thus, while historians must know the language of the society they study, they cannot be satisfied with dictionary meanings of the text.

Dr. Joseph F. Privitera in his book *Beginner's Sicilian* clearly understands this hermeneutic concept of hidden meanings. He writes:

“Language is a mainstream of the life and culture of a people; it reflects its history, its manners and its very thoughts.” (p 23)

The “life and culture” and “history of a people” are the “hidden meanings” in the language to which Langlois and Seignobos were referring.

More than a ‘donkey’

For example, consider the following three words respectively in English, Tuscan and Sicilian: ‘donkey’, ‘asino’ and ‘sceccu’. The denotative (dictionary) meaning for all three is the same object (i.e. animal). Thus, the following three sentences have the same meaning based solely on denotative definitions:

- There is a ‘donkey’.
- There is an ‘asino’.
- There is a ‘sceccu’.

All three sentences convey the same thought to the listener; i.e. locating the position of the same animal.

However, there is a ‘hidden’ -“historical /cultural”- meaning in the Sicilian word ‘sceccu’ that is not contained in the English ‘donkey’ or Tuscan ‘asino’.

Dr. Privitera:

“Sceccu (SHEH koo) comes from the Arabic ‘Sheikh, a name given by the islanders to the donkey, in derision of their medieval Saracen masters, who rode on donkeys from village to village, maintaining order and collecting taxes. (p 23)

In short, the history of Sicily is contained in the language of Sicily.

Dr. Privitera:

“The same language tells you who occupied the island, used it and abused it – the early Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs, the Normans, the Byzantines the French and the Spanish Bourbons.” P23

No historian trained in **hermeneutic historiography** would presume to write the history of Sicily based solely on the denotative meanings of Sicilian words. Similarly, literary criticism that does not take into consideration the hidden historical cultural meanings of the text would not be very enlightening.

Another delightful example of hidden historical cultural meanings not obvious in the denotative definition, Dr. Privitera:



“Say ciceri (CHEE cheh ree) chickpeas and the Sicilian Vespers leap to mind when, in the thirteenth century, the islanders rebelled against the French, their new oppressive masters. The Sicilians were able to identify the French by their French pronunciation (SEE say ree) of the word ciceri. Those who could not pronounce ciceri correctly were put to the sword. (p24)

Again three words denote the same object (i.e. same dictionary meaning):

English - ‘chickpea’,

Tuscan - ‘cece,’

Sicilian - ‘ciceri’.

However, the Sicilian word ‘ciceri’ is chuck-full of hidden history and culture that the Tuscan ‘cece’ or the English ‘chickpea’ are lacking.

Thus, apart from nationalistic motivation to preserve or revive an indigenous language there is an historical cultural motivation. **Language contains the history and culture of a people; to give it up is to give up the history and culture.** The Norwegians and Irish refused to part with their language (i.e. part with their history and culture) and seemingly the people south of Rome are resisting the historically and culturally empty Tuscan lingua franca imposed on them.

Southern-Italian Americana- Illusionary Cultural Roads

To my mind, the death of Sicilian and southern-Italian languages in American explains, what I judge to be, the death of the authentic Italian American history/culture.

The only thing that passes for **Italian American history/culture today** are nostalgic anecdotal images largely conjured by movies, televisions and family oral traditions of Little Italy fading with each passing generation.

There is absolutely no knowledge of our history before the great immigration. In school the progeny of southern Italy learn the Tuscan lingua franca and the northern Renaissance art culture.

NOTE: Again, the role of the Italian American “men [people]-of-letters” (literati) TEACHERS who are charged with the education of southern-Italian American children. Recall, the British demanded that English be taught in Irish schools. **Ultimately, it is indigenous teachers who kill a national language and thereby the history and culture of the people.**

Americans of southern-Italian descent would do well reflecting on the revival of the ‘dead languages’ in Norway and Ireland, and the resistance to Tuscan lingua franca south of Rome.

In the absence of a hermeneutically reviling reality based historic/cultural language, southern-Italian Americans have two illusionary historic/cultural roads to choose from:

mass media illusions - Jersey Shore, Sopranos, Casino, Goodfellows, Donnie Brasco, etc.

or

Tuscan- esque literati illusions - Tuscan language and Renaissance.

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